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ABSTRACT

The study of registers in language is the study of language as it varies according to "use." The situation in which language is used imposes certain constraints on the structure and lexical ingredients of the language. In this report, the author investigates the use of verbs in two different registers in English. The frequency of verbs in both their purely lexical and structural occurrences is measured, and the findings are reported. The statistical differences in usage carry implications for language instruction. An awareness of the relative frequency or infrequency of occurrences of specific teaching points might guide teachers in their practical work. (VM)

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*Register Constraints on the Choice of the English Verb

by

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* I am indebted to Mr. William R. Tremaine, Chief of the Division, for smoothing the way for the implementation of the Research Project reported in this paper, and to my colleagues of the Research Section, Mrs. Darien Neufeld, Mr. Glenn Barker and Miss Helen Sorhus for their patient and arduous work.

This time last year I had carefully prepared a paper for the TESOL Annual Convention and had the hope that the paper would earn me a few days off from the bitter Canadian winter, and take me off to the warmth of the New Orleans sun. The paper was never read at New Orleans; I never even got across the border. Not that I did not try. I was snowed in on my train journey from Montreal to New York, after trying every conceivable means of travel except dog-team. There I was, caught right in the midst of the worst Canadian snow-storm of the century during the course of the last annual convention. This year, I had the dog team in reserve, but happily, I didn't need it.

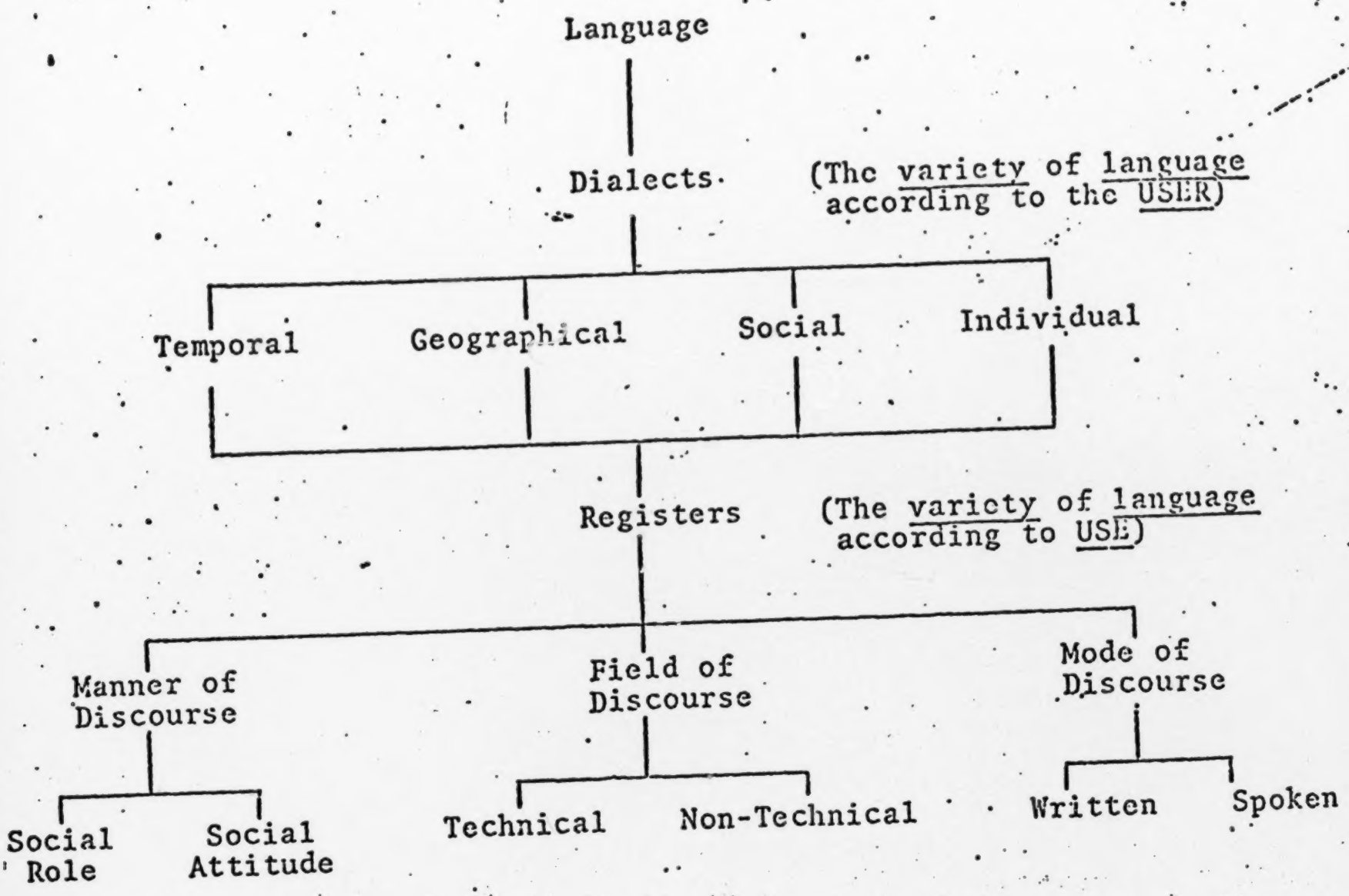
The present paper "Register Constraints on the choice of the English Verb" shares the same conceptual frame with the one I prepared for the last Convention: "Measuring Register Characteristics: A Prerequisite for Preparing Advanced Level TESOL Programs", which the editor of your journal, the TESOL Quarterly, has kindly accepted for publication. It will come out, I believe, in the next issue. That paper dwells on the linguistic observation that a language varies as its function varies; it differs in different situations. Just as any other natural language, English exists, not as a single uniform entity, but as a constellation of varieties, each functioning in a particular way. 'The English Language' as a label does not refer to a single homogeneous phenomenon, as the name seems to imply, but rather to a complex of many different

varieties of use in all kinds of situations in many parts of the world. While the label given to a variety of a language according to the 'user' is 'dialect', the less-known label given to a variety of a language according to 'use' is 'register'.1. One does not write English as one would speak it. One does not give a lecture with the kind of language one uses with small children. Each situation, each use, calls for its own appropriate variety.

Linguists involved in 'register-study' thus attempt to define and identify the linguistic features which are regularly used in recurrent situations, and to categorize the varieties of the language demarcated in this way. 'Register characteristics' are sets of linguistics forms found to have a regular connection with a particular use of the language in a particular situation, or sets of situations. It does not mean that the connection is necessarily obligatory, but there is enough of a connection to give a native speaker an intuitive feeling of the existence of a link between the language and the situation.

In the last paper, I presented a model for categorizing intra-language varieties.

Here is a simplified version of that model.



According to this model, 'registers' may vary in three dimensions: 'field of discourse', 'mode of discourse' and 'manner of discourse'. 'Field of discourse' refers to the 'why' of a speaker's or a writer's use of language -- the purpose the speaker employs language for -- persuasion, discussion or insult as intended. 'Mode of discourse' refers to the medium, and concerns primarily a distinction between 'spoken' and 'written' varieties of a language. And 'manner of discourse' refers to specifying the relations among the participants in a

language activity, which can be further sub-categorized into 'social rôle' and 'social attitude'. It is as the product of these three dimensions of categorization that 'registers' can be systematically defined and identified. And this framework of register-classification may serve TESOL course-designers, textbook writers and teachers to map out and locate the various sociolinguistic situations which students are likely to encounter.

Since no single variety of a language can serve as an all-purpose model, a range of varieties must be the aim of any teaching program. It is the task of TESOL specialists to work out how to select, grade and present 'registers' systematically within the framework of the English language according to the needs of the learners. As an illustration for an approach to such a task, I reported on the design, the procedure and some partial findings of a research project which aimed at relating the linguistic concept of situationally-differentiated language variety to the preparation of TESOL programs. Today, I am in the position to present you with more results.

The present paper aims at a further clarifying the concept of situational constraints on the use of the English language. It focuses on describing the range of choice in the use of the English Verb, both lexically and structurally as manifest in a synchronic corpus of varying registers. It attempts to demonstrate to what extent register, the variety of language according to use,

exercises constraints on the native-speakers' selection of lexical verbs and verb structures in discourse and in writing.

In Canada we have two official languages - English and French. In the English program of the Language Bureau, the teaching target is to enable French-speaking government employees to function in English in their work. A similar program exists to teach English-speaking employees French. Our students will be expected to understand and to write in the register of 'administrative English'. In this case, the purpose of the language use is to administer — to authorize, to instruct, to inform, to report, to request, or to forward information according to the accepted conventions of this specific variety of English within the government hierarchy. This variety of language activity is highly 'ritualized'. The 'social rôle' which the language-user plays is his 'official' function in the public service, while the 'social attitude' will be 'polite' or 'formal', if not 'ceremonious'. High-ranking public servants will also be expected to participate in topic-oriented discussions in 'official' meetings in the 'formal' atmosphere of the boardroom. Since we can reasonably predict that our students will inevitably encounter situations where they will be expected to use the above-mentioned varieties of English, we have planned to systematically look into the linguistic-characteristics of these registers so that suitable teaching materials can be designed, and so that clearer understanding of the concept of register can be brought about and

be related to language teaching as a new criterion of selection, gradation and presentation.

Our corpus of slightly over 250,000 running words of administrative writing, randomly sampled, is all dated no further back than 1968. The corpus can be regarded as a register of Standard Canadian Government English since the correspondence is either interdepartmental, intradepartmental or from government departments to outside concerns. The spoken corpus we have is about one-quarter of the size of the written one. It consists of over 60,000 running words of topic-oriented government boardroom discussions. The conversations were taped and then transcribed. A Verb Phrase analysis has been done on both sets of materials. VERB PHRASE is used to cover segments of language within which statements may be made on the possibilities of co-occurrence of particular verb forms and their relations.

Here are some of the verb phrases:

Table : 1

AAC

1. should be amended by
2. will be provided
3. involves
4. has been appointed
5. please find

6. became *acquainted
7. would get the liaison officer to *participate

ASE

8. 're doing
9. might have had
10. 've done
11. can answer
12. wish

13. 'd like to *ask
14. 'd have dared *speak

Verb phrases 1 to 7 are taken from the written corpus of administrative writing, which is referred to as AAC (Analysis of Administrative Correspondence). Verb phrases 8 to 14 are taken from the spoken corpus of topic-oriented boardroom discussions, which is referred to as ASE (Analysis of Spoken English). All the verb phrases in both corpora are marked off. Notice the lexical verbs, or what are often called full verbs, content verbs, main verbs, or head verbs are underlined. Verb phrases with only one lexical verb are Simple phrases, though they may or may not contain a number of auxiliaries, such as verb phrases 1 to 5 and verb phrases 8 to 12. Verb phrases that contain more than one lexical verb are Complex phrases, such as verb phrases 6 and 7, and 13 and 14, where both the underlined items and asterisked items are lexical verbs. Over 26,000 lexical verb tokens, ie, the underlined items, and the verb phrases in which they occurred have been analysed and quantified in our study.

Some lexical information first. We have compiled two Frequency Lists of lexical verbs = one for AAC and one for ASE. The lexical verbs are all ranked according to their frequency of occurrence. In Table 2 the most frequent 30 lexical verb types of AAC and ASE are put side by side, with frequency of occurrence of every lexical verb reduced to Frequency per 10,000 words to facilitate comparison.

Table 2 THE MOST FREQUENT 30 TYPES, WITH FREQUENCY REDUCED TO FREQUENCY PER 10,000 RUNNING WORDS

AAC			ASE		
Rank		Frequency/ 10,000 words	Rank		Frequency/ 10,000 words.
(1)	BE	135.28	(1)	BE	366.00
(2)	HAVE	25.40	(2)	HAVE	99.66
(3)	MAKE	14.68	(3)	THINK	96.50
(4)	REQUIRE	11.44	(4)	KNOW	59.00
(5)	ATTACH	11.04	(5)	GO	49.83
(6)	APPRECIATE	9.92	(6)	SAY	46.00
(7)	ENCLOSE	9.84	(7)	GET	34.50
(8)	RECEIVE	8.54	(8)	TAKE	26.33
(9)	PROVIDE	7.60	(9)	DO	24.17
(9)	REFER	7.60	(10)	FIND	19.33
(10)	TAKE	7.44	(11)	COME	18.33
(11)	REQUEST	7.2	(12)	MAKE	17.33
(12)	SEND	7.16	(13)	FEEL	16.00
(13)	FIND	6.88	(14)	SEE	15.66
(14)	WISH	6.8	(14)	SPEAK	15.66
(15)	SUGGEST	6.36	(16)	LIKE	14.00
(16)	ADVISE	6.04	(17)	WANT	13.17
(17)	ASK	5.92	(18)	LEARN	11.17
(18)	GIVE	5.88	(18)	MEAN	11.17
(19)	FORWARD	5.84	(19)	TALK	10.83
(20)	INCLUDE	5.64	(20)	USE	10.17
(21)	NOTE	5.32	(21)	WORK	9.83
(22)	USE	5.28	(22)	AGREE	8.33
(23)	THANK	4.84	(23)	UNDERSTAND	8.17
(24)	INDICATE	4.8	(24)	START	7.17
(25)	CONSIDER	4.68	(24)	TRY	7.17
(25)	LIKE	4.68	(25)	GIVE	7.00
(26)	APPEAR	4.36	(26)	SEEM	6.83
(26)	FEEL	4.36	(27)	HEAR	6.50
(27)	PREPARE	4.04	(28)	PUT	6.17

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From the list it is obvious that English-speaking public servants choose different sets of lexical verbs to write with and to speak with.

In AAC Corpus of slightly over 250,000 running words, the total number of verbs, what we refer to as lexical verb tokens is slightly under 18,000 while the number of different verbs, lexical verb types, is just over 1,000. The ASE corpus, which is about one-quarter of the size of AAC has over 8,000 lexical verb tokens and over 550 verb types. The 30 most frequent verbs from AAC listed in Table 2 account for only 3% of the total number of different verbs - types - , but their frequency accounts for almost 50% of the total of all verbs - tokens -, while the 30 most frequent types of ASE account for 5% of the total types and their frequency represents an astounding three-quarters of all the tokens.

Table 3 FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF THE 30 MOST FREQUENT TYPES OF AAC AND ASE

	NO. OF TYPES	% OF TOTAL TYPES	CUMULATIVE NO. OF TOKENS	% OF TOTAL TOKENS
AAC	30	2.89	8,964	49.94
ASE	30	5.36	6,307	76.20

You will see an obvious tendency of the language-user to limit the choice of verbs to restricted but appropriate sets according to different purposes, and differing uses of the language.

When the 50 most frequent lexical verb types of AAC and ASE are compared, only the following 18 more context-free and less situation-bound verbs are common to both registers (See Table 5). It means that there are two sets of 32 lexical verb types each, which are unique to AAC and ASE respectively, considering the most frequent 50 types.

Table 4A

AAC RANK	LEXICAL VERB	AAC FREQUENCY	ASE FREQUENCY	ASE RANK
(4)	REQUIRE	236	7	(49)
(5)	ATTACH	276	1	(55)
(6)	APPRECIATE	248	10	(46)
(7)	ENCLOSE	246	--	--

Table 4B

ASE RANK	LEXICAL VERB	ASE FREQUENCY	AAC FREQUENCY	AAC RANK
(3)	THINK	579	68	(41)
(4)	KNOW	354	73	(38)
(5)	GO	299	41	(62)
(6)	SAY	276	44	(59)

Table 5

LEXICAL VERB TYPES COMMON TO AAC AND ASE,
CONSIDERING THE 50 MOST FREQUENT TYPES

	Lexical Verb	AAC Rank	ASE Rank
1	MAKE	(3)	(12)
2	TAKE	(10)	(8)
3	SEND	(12)	(39)
4	FIND	(13)	(10)
5	SUGGEST	(15)	(34)
6	ASK	(17)	(29)
7	GIVE	(18)	(25)
8	USE	(22)	(20)
9	LIKE	(25)	(16)
10	FEEL	(26)	(13)
11	AGREE	(28)	(22)
12	DO	(29)	(9)
13	UNDERSTAND	(35)	(23)
14	KNOW	(38)	(4)
15	BELIEVE	(40)	(40)
16	SEE	(41)	(14)
17	THINK	(41)	(3)
18	COME	(42)	(11)

High frequency AAC lexical types do not only have low frequency of occurrence in ASE but have remarkably lower frequency of occurrence in the Kucera count, which is a compilation of more than one million running words, spread over 15 genres of written English, and the large Magazuie count, which included nearly 4½ million words from the Saturday Evening Post, Women's Home Journal, True Story and Readers' Digest.

Table 6 LEXICAL VERB TYPES COMMON TO AAC, LORGE AND KUČERA, CONSIDERING THE MOST FREQUENT 50 LEXICAL VERB TYPES EXCLUDING "BE" AND "HAVE"

AAC - LORGE			AAC - KUČERA			KUČERA - LORGE					
1	make	(3, 5)	1	make	(3, 2)	1	make	(2, 5)	18	place	(17,27)
2	take	(10, 9)	2	provide	(9,46)	2	find	(12,15)	19	own	(18,21)
3	find	(13,15)	3	take	(10, 4)	3	take	(4, 9)	20	become	(20,48)
4	ask	(17, 2)	4	find	(13,12)	4	give	(9,14)	21	tell	(21,26)
5	give	(18,14)	5	ask	(17,29)	5	use	(8,20)	22	mean	(23,41)
6	use	(22,20)	6	give	(18, 9)	6	ask	(29, 2)	23	call	(24,30)
7	like	(25,10)	7	use	(22, 8)	7	know	(7, 6)	24	need	(25,39)
8	feel	(26,22)	8	feel	(26,19)	8	feel	(19,22)	25	begin	(26,33)
9	interest	(30,43)	9	interest	(30,30)	9	interest	(30,43)	26	turn	(26,24)
10	know	(38, 6)	10	know	(38, 7)	10	say	(1, 3)	27	want	(27,13)
11	see	(41, 8)	11	show	(38,22)	11	go	(3, 1)	28	live	(33,19)
12	think	(41,11)	12	think	(41,11)	12	come	(5, 4)	29	keep	(37,31)
13	come	(42, 4)	13	write	(41,31)	13	get	(6, 7)	30	put	(41,36)
			14	come	(42, 5)	14	think	(11,11)	31	bring	(45,47)
						15	look	(14,12)	32	let	(45,32)
						16	seem	(15,18)	33	try	(46,29)

Table 7 COMPARISON OF HIGH FREQUENCY AAC LEXICAL VERB TYPES TO THEIR FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE IN OTHER LISTS

AAC Rank	Lexical Verb	AAC Freq. per 10,000 wds.	Kucera Freq. per 10,000 wds.	Lorge Freq. per 10,000 wds.	ASE Freq. per 10,000 wds.
(4)	require	11.44	3.4	1.3	1.20
(5)	attach	11.04	0.4	0.3	0.17
(6)	appreciate	9.92	0.4	0.5	1.67
(7)	enclose	9.84	0.1	0.1	0.00
(8)	receive	8.54	2.7	1.6	0.83
(9)	provide	7.60	4.9	1.4	0.50
(9)	refer	7.60	1.1	0.4	0.17

It is indicative that this set of lexical verbs are highly register-bound. It can be considered as the set of 'specialized verbs' of the register of administrative writing, and can be looked upon as powerful register-makers of administrative writing. Educated native speakers of English will be constrained by intuition gained from experience to resort to the circumscribed set, when they are called on to produce administrative writing, conforming to the accepted convention.

We have looked up the number of dictionary meanings of the 20 most high frequency lexical verb types of AAC and ASE. It confirmed our hunch that the ASE set has a wider range of dictionary meanings and is less specialized. In fact, the average number of meanings per word of the ASE set slightly doubles that of the AAC set .

Focusing only on the choice of the English Verb, we might conclude that AAC is marked off from other registers by its heavy reliance on highly specialized set of lexical verb types. As for ASE, even though its high frequency lexical verb types are not as context-and register-bound as the AAC set, ASE register may be distinguished from others by its liberal use of the same types again and again, resulting in a few types with disproportionately high frequency of occurrence.

So far we have only been presenting some of our findings on lexical verbs as chosen and used frequently in administrative writing and topic-oriented discussions. Now, I will

Table 8 COMPARISON OF HIGH FREQUENCY ASE LEXICAL VERB TYPES TO THEIR FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE IN OTHER LISTS.

ASE RANK	LEXICAL VERB	ASE FREQUENCY per 10,000 wds.	KUCERA FREQ/10,000	LORGE FREQ/10,000	AAC FREQ/10,000
(3)	THINK	96.50	11.2	20.8	2.72
(4)	KNOW	59.00	14.7	26.3	2.92
(5)	GO	49.83	18.3	49.5	1.64
(6)	SAY	46.00	27.8	38.6	1.76
(7)	GET	34.50	14.8	24.6	1.60
(8)	TAKE	26.33	15.9	21.2	7.44
(9)	DO	24.17			3.76
(10)	FIND	19.33	10.5	12.4	6.88

Table 8B

-6	became *acquainted	C
7	would get the liaison officer to *participate	C
13	'd like to *ask	C
14	'd have dared *speak	C
5	please find	I
3	involves	U
12	wish	U

attempt to highlight some findings on the analysis and quantification of Verb Phrases, the structural frames in which the lexical verbs occurred.

To code our verb phrases for analysis, we have used a binary-distinction grid in which all verb phrases can be quickly coded and catalogued.

First a verb phrase can either be a Complex phrase, that is, a phrase with more than one lexical verb, or a Simple phrase - a phrase with only one lexical verb. Secondly, a verb phrase can either be an Imperative phrase or a Non-Imperative phrase. The third distinction is that a verb phrase can either be Unmarked or Marked. Let's look at Table 9.

Table 9

Category	Tense	Mood	Phase	Aspect	Voice
Unmarked	non-past	non-modal	non-perfect	non-progressive	non-passive
Marked	past	modal	perfect	progressive	passive
Markers	-D	CAN MAY WILL SHALL etc.	HAVE + - n	BE + - ing	BE + - n
Code for Marked Category	T	M	P	A	V

An Unmarked Phrase is one that is not marked in Tense, nor Mood, nor Phase, nor Aspect, nor Voice, while a Marked Phrase is one that is marked in any or all of the five categories.

The coding system and how we developed it is less important than the data we get from it. A system of binary distinctions enables us to code each verb phrase uniquely for analysis and comparison. So, for example, here are some coded phrases ready for computer imput (Table 10).

Table 10

AAC	1	should be amended by	T M V B
	2	will be provided	M V
	3	involves	U
	4	has been appointed	P V
	5	please find	I
	6	became *acquainted	C T
	7	would get the liaison officer to *participate	C T M
ASE	8	're doing	A
	9	might have had	T M P
	10	've done	P
	11	can answer	M P
	12	wish	U
	13	'd like to *ask	C T M
	14	'd have dared *speak	C T M P

In AAC we have a total of about 18,000 verb phrase tokens in a corpus of 250,000 running words. The ratio of verb phrases to running words is 1 : 13. In other words, in every 13 words, there is a Verb Phrase. According to our model of analysis, a total of 66 unique verb phrase types are found. In table 11, the 10 most frequent verb phrase types of AAC are listed.

Table 11 A.A.C. THE 10 MOST FREQUENT VERB PHRASE TYPES

RANK	VERB PHRASE	FREQUENCY	EXAMPLE
1	U	4,525	makes
2	V	1,644	is made
3	M	1,614	can make
4	TM	1,367	should make
5	T	1,132	made
6	P	812	has made
7	MV	749	can be made
8	UC	735	request the consultant to *attend
9	TMV	554	could be made
10	TV	508	was made

The first 5 types together have a frequency that accounts for more than 50% of the total verb phrases. The first 10 types have a frequency that represents three-quarters of the total verb phrases. Among the 66 unique verb phrase types manifest in AAC, there are 32 types with individual frequencies of less than 30. The total frequency of these 32 types represents a mere 1% of the total verb phrases. Thus, we see that there are a few verb phrse types that occur very frequently in this register. On the other hand, there are quite a few others that occur very very rarely.

Now let's look at the corresponding results of ASE. There is a total of over 8,000 verb phrases in the corpus of over 60,000 running words. The ratio of verb phrases to running words is about 1 : 7. There is a verb phrase in every seven words. In Table 12, the most frequent verb phrase types are listed.

Table 12 A.S.E. THE 10 MOST FREQUENT VERB PHRASE TYPES

RANK	VERB PHRASE	FREQUENCY	EXAMPLE
1	U	3,527	takes
2	T	969	took
3	TM	649	might take
4	subscripts	495	doesn't take
5	M	444	can take
6	UC	380	have to *read
7	P	376	has taken
8	A	301	is taking
9	V	188	is done
10	CT	128	found himself *immersed

The first 2 types together have a frequency that represents over 50% of all the verb phrases. In other words, 50% of the verb phrases are either in what we traditionally called "simple present tense" or "Simple past tense". The frequency of the first 5 types accounts for over 70% of the verb phrases, while the frequency of the first 10 types taken together increases the percentage to almost 90%. Among the 49 unique verb phrase types manifest in ASE, there are no less than 30 types with individual frequencies of less than 30. And the total frequency of these 30 types accounts for only 3% of all the verb phrases. Again, we see there is

a limited number of verb phrase types that occur very very frequently in this register. There is a considerable larger number of types that occur very rarely indeed.

The pedagogical implications of our findings are manifold. But I shall have time only to deal with one of the most significant points. Here, I would like to quote H.V. George who made the following remarks in his Report on Verb-Form Frequency Count, Hyderabad, 1963. "There are two kinds of priority in teaching - one determines the sequence of teaching points; the other, the amount of work the teachers and the learners direct to each of the teaching points. Teaching priority in the first sense depends on consideration of many factors, and usage frequency-counting may, eventually, take a place among them. The order of presentation of teaching points is, in any case, mainly decided by the course-designers. The second type of priority-attribution is particularly relevant to the general character of the students' English after they have worked through a course. This is largely in the control of the teachers. If, for instance, all the tenses have been taught with equal thoroughness, and drilled with impartial application, then the students' English is likely to differ from native English in two ways - it is likely to show a wider and a more even distribution of usage, and it is likely to show personal usage-habits which may be "correct" in so far as they represent features which could be used by native speakers, but which cause these features to figure disproportionately. An awareness of the relative

frequency or infrequency of occurrences of specific teaching points might guide teachers in their practical work; often, course-book treatment needs supplementing, but equally often learners need warning against over-use of what they are learning"[7].

In our Verb Phrase analysis on the two distinct registers, we have built in a system of cross-reference from lexical information to structural information, and vice versa. When we compared the 30 most frequent lexical verb types of AAC and ASE, (See Table 2) we have found that there are several types which are common to both lists. For example, '<u>find</u>' which is Rank 13 in AAC and Rank 10 in ASE, '<u>feel</u>' ranks 26 in AAC and 13 in ASE. From our analysis, we can find out whether or not they occurred in the same set of verb phrase types, how they are distributed within each register, and how they are marked. Table 13 shows the distinction in usage of one from the other.

Table 13

Find	AAC		ASE	
	OC	%	OC	%
Unmarked phrases	48	27.91	71	61.21
Phrases marked with T	28	16.28	30	25.86
Phrases marked with M	78	45.35	9	7.76
Phrases marked with P	12	6.98	10	8.62
Phrases marked with A	0	0.00	1	0.86
Phrases marked with V/VB	28	16.28	0	0.00
Phrases marked with TM	13	7.56	5	4.31
Phrases marked with C	65	37.71	13	11.2

Feel	AAC		ASE	
	OC	%	CC	%
Unmarked phrases	84	77.06	70	72.92
Phrases marked with T	19	17.43	22	22.92
Phrases marked with M	3	2.75	10	10.42
Phrases marked with P	1	0.92	2	02.08
Phrases marked with A	0	0.00	1	01.04
Phrases marked with V/VB	7	6.42	0	0.00
Phrases marked with TM	3	2.75	8	08.33
Phrases marked with C	0	0.00	5	05.21

Though such verbs as lexical items they might be employed frequently by both registers, the registers constrain them to take up different verb-frames in differing proportions. Notice especially the obvious contrast between the occurrences of the passive voice.